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ABSTRACT

The technique of subliminal information giving has been considerably broadened in recent years so that magazine ads now employ it by carefully hiding images where they are not usually perceived with the conscious eye. In his recent book, "Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media's Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America," Wilson B. Key demonstrates that subliminal messages in ads are perceived and do have an impact on attitudes and actions. After conducting his own personal search to find the "hidden persuaders," the author of this article was convinced that advertisements are full of hidden information, which is usually of a sexual nature. He suggests that it is important that English teachers become aware of this phenomenon, since it is a part of communication. Furthermore, he contends that we cannot accept or reject such information until we become conscious of it and are able to act on it in our normal, rational ways. (LL)

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SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES IN ADVERTISING

by Miles C. Olson

The effects of such techniques as "bandwagon" and "appeal to basic needs" in advertising are common studies in many English classes. There is a new area, however, which merits some attention from the profession, particularly because of its subtle, insidious potential for shaping human beings. That area is the subliminal communication system.

The usual picture which the word "subliminal" conjures up is the movie theatre with messages being flashed on the screen for a fraction of a second telling patrons to buy soda pop and popcorn. This classical experiment really worked. People never saw the message consciously, but they bought soda pop and popcorn like mad. The conclusion: we react to things we can't see with our conscious minds, and we, therefore, react to many more things than we think we do.

The technique of subliminal information giving has been considerably broadened in recent years so magazine ads now employ it. The magazine advertisers do not include a tachistoscope with their product; it is much more subtle than that. Rather than providing images which flash on the screen for milli-seconds, they carefully hide their images where we will not see them with the conscious eye.

Wilson B. Key has written a recent book illustrating how this phenomenon works. The book should, in my opinion, be on every English teacher's must reading list. The book is Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media's Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America, published by Prentice Hall (1973).

Key, through a number of studies, demonstrates that subliminal messages in ads do, in fact, get through, and do, in fact, have an impact

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On attitudes and actions. While there are many ways of communicating subliminally (low light intensity, where a message is played on the screen at a light level below that normally required for conscious observation; low sound, where sound is played at frequencies or amplitudes below those normally required for conscious hearing; high sound, exemplified by the "silent" dog whistle, which can be heard subconsciously but not consciously; and a multitude of others), I will be concerned here only with visual messages imbedded in magazine advertising.

After reading Key's excellent book, I began a study of magazine ads to see if I could find the "hidden persuaders" he writes about. About six months of on-and-off searching have convinced me Key is right, and that, if anything, he understates the case.

I found liquor ads to be the most fruitful area of search. A very common ad shows a velvet-toned background with the most interesting pictures hidden--where would you guess?--in the ice cubes, of course. This particular ad shows a beach at sunset, with two figures in an embrace. In the background is a volcano. Now, if one has read at all in archetypal theory, he knows that certain objects seem to have almost universal meaning. The quiet beach and the lovers are commonplace symbols, and the volcano, penile symbol that it is, may symbolize the beginning of life or the sexual act. Whether the volcano is seen as symbolic or not, the total picture is clearly one of romance with overtones of sexual activity. The subliminal message is, "Buy _____ whiskey and have romance/sex." Interestingly enough, the ad is, to the conscious eye, simply a picture of a whiskey bottle and a glass filled with whiskey and ice.

Another series of ads, this one for rum, was more blatant in its approach. A penis and a vagina both are clearly visible in the ice cubes, with the penis just at the point of penetration. This is the most overt sexual message I found in my search, but it is indicative of the possibilities advertisers see in this form of subliminal information giving. Incidentally, not one person who has seen this particular ad has noticed anything unusual in it when he first looked at the ad. Yet not one of the individuals who has looked at the ad after being told to look for something "sexy" in the ice has failed to find the genetalia.

Liquor ads are full of hidden messages. But other ads have them, too. A recent ad for a rapid, effortless information processing system to make learning easier contained a quotation which suggested that anything worth learning must be difficult. The thrust of the ad was that the individual quoted was incorrect. And to support that point, the ad carried the words "f--k you" very carefully imbedded and disguised under the quotation. This particular ad is made even more interesting by the fact that the hidden words appeared in the design in one magazine, but did not when the identical ad appeared in another.

How can the mind assimilate all this information in the instant we typically spend looking at an ad? It often takes several minutes to find these "hidden" messages. The conscious mind can assimilate only a very little. But it is the unconscious mind, that value-free, all-encompassing mind, that instantaneous recorder of everything, which can take it all in. It would be unusual if one percent of the readers of an ad would identify consciously the subliminal information provided. If a significant number did identify that information, the effectiveness of the ad would probably

be lost, for our conscious minds would act in rational ways to interpret and challenge the data. But the subconscious, free of value systems, can be entered by messages, and those messages can have an impact on our behavior.

Why should English teachers know about this sort of thing? Precisely because when the subliminal becomes conscious, when we know consciously what is being communicated, we can act on that information in our normal, rational ways. We can weigh the information given and accept or reject it rationally, without being led by irrational messages which have little or nothing to do with the product itself. Our subconscious will see many things in the hidden messages imbedded in these ads. But once the conscious mind and its value systems are brought to bear in the interpretation of the ad, the process becomes one of weighing evidence and making decisions on the basis of information we know consciously.

What steps should one interested in exploring such a phenomenon take? First, buy Keys' book. Then start looking for hidden images in ice cubes in liquor ads. And when you see things, don't be afraid that you are losing your sanity. And don't feel that you are "seeing things" when you find messages other than sex-oriented ones in ads. Key feels the next big push will be in the use of death symbols, since sex may have reached the saturation point.

Does all this make you ill? One final tidbit to make it even worse. The U.S. Army has been known to use subliminal information in some of its recruiting ads. Such activity is sufficiently close to high governmental levels to suggest the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak should add a subcommittee on "Doublesee." If a picture is worth a thousand words, perhaps a subliminal picture is worth even more.